

The impact of a Rights Respecting School approach on feelings of belonging and inclusion experienced by pupils in school

Final report

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Acronyms and abbreviations

EAL	English as an Additional Language
RRS	Rights Respecting Schools
RRSA	Rights Respecting Schools Award
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the project

UNICEF UK is concerned with promoting knowledge and understanding about children's rights. Their well-established school-based Rights Respecting School Award (RRSA) supports schools in this endeavour and aims to ensure children¹ and adults in schools can recognise and respond to children's rights violations. UNICEF UK has conducted large scale research in schools registered for the RRSA with the aim of enhancing understandings about the impact of the award and informing their future practice (UNICEF UK, 2020). However, one area that is currently underexplored relates to how RRSA supports children to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school. It is this area on which this study focuses.

1.2 Project aims

The project aimed to address the current gap in knowledge about the impact of a UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools (RRS) approach on supporting children to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in the education system².

The project aimed to develop new insights into:

- (i) the impact of UNICEF UK's RRS approach on feelings of belonging and inclusion experienced by pupils.
- (ii) challenges associated with ensuring all pupils, including those identified as marginalised, develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school.

Consideration was also given to whether knowledge and understanding about children's rights impacts on pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion.

1.3 UNICEF UK's RRSA

1.3.1 Overview of UNICEF UK's RRSA

In 2004 UNICEF UK launched their RRSA. When schools adopt an RRS approach the whole school community learns about children's rights and a school-wide approach is taken to embedding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) into daily practices. Schools demonstrate a full commitment to rights through their vision and values, and the UNCRC is placed at the centre of the school ethos, learning, relationships, decision making and policies (UNICEF UK, 2024).

Once schools have registered for the RRSA they work through Bronze, Silver and Gold awards as they introduce, embed and sustain an RRS approach (UNICEF UK, 2024):

- Registration level indicates a school's interest in the RRSA.
- Bronze RRSA is awarded when schools demonstrate they are Rights Committed.
- Silver RRSA is achieved when a school is Rights Aware.
- Gold RRSA is achieved when a school is Rights Respecting.

¹ The term 'children' refers to the definition in Article 1 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989), that is, children and young people up to the age of 18.

² 'Education system' refers to education provision in the form of mainstream schools, pupil referral units and other alternative education provision. Throughout the report, the term 'schools' will be used to refer to all education provision for children up to the age of 18.

There are 5,200 UK primary, secondary and special schools registered for UNICEF UK's RRSA, reaching over 1.75 million children, and around 2,500 schools have achieved Silver or Gold RRSA. Evidence from UNICEF UK (2024) and other studies indicate that when schools successfully adopt an RRS approach this impacts positively on children and adults in school, as well as on the wider school environment. Current understandings about the impact of schools adopting an RRS approach are summarised below.

1.3.2 The impact of implementing a Rights Respecting Schools approach: what the evidence tells us

1. Children learn about rights and how to exercise their rights

Children and adults in Rights Respecting schools know about the UNCRC and children's rights and they are aware of the fundamental principles necessary for upholding these rights (UNICEF UK, 2024). When children know about rights and see rights in practice at school this helps them to recognise, protect and promote their rights and the rights of others (Sebba and Robinson, 2010; Struthers, 2021; UNICEF UK, 2024). Knowing about rights also helps children to value themselves and to develop self-respect, a positive self-esteem, a greater appreciation of diversity and an understanding of what rights mean for children around the world (EHRC, 2020; UNICEF UK, 2024). Moreover, when teachers understand children's rights and how to protect these rights, they can empower children to recognise rights violations and to take action to uphold their rights and the rights of others (Struthers, 2021; UNICEF UK, 2024).

2. Children experience a culture of inclusion in school, and a school-wide Rights Respecting language is adopted throughout the school

An RRS approach values all pupils and actively works towards achieving and sustaining a strong culture of inclusion (UNICEF UK, 2024). A Rights Respecting school also fosters shared community values (Covell et al., 2010) including a Rights Respecting language, that is, a vocabulary and way of talking that demonstrates respect for the rights of others. This language runs through the whole school and enables a school-wide respectful approach to conflict resolution, leading to improved relationships (Sebba and Robinson, 2010).

3. Positive relationships develop across the school

When schools adopt a Rights Respecting approach, this contributes towards positive pupil, staff, and pupil-staff relationships (Covell et al., 2010; UNICEF UK, 2024) based on dignity and respect (UNICEF UK, 2024). Learning about rights increases children's awareness of the responsibility they have towards others and helps to nurture an environment that supports positive interpersonal interactions (Dunhill, 2018), including a reduction in prejudice and discriminatory attitudes (EHRC, 2020).

4. Increase in pupil engagement and enjoyment of school, and improvement in attainment and attendance

There is a positive correlation between adopting a Rights Respecting approach and school engagement (Covell, 2010; EHRC, 2020; Norwich, 2025), improved attainment (EHRC, 2020; Howe and Covell, 2013), enjoyment of school (Norwich, 2025) and school attendance (EHRC, 2020). Additionally, increased school engagement and enjoyment are known to support the development of positive relationships (UNICEF UK, 2024; Wang and Eccles, 2012). Evidence also suggests that through an RRS approach promoting equality and respect among pupils, this leads to pupils making a greater effort to participate in lessons (Covell et al., 2009).

5. Children's voices are heard and valued

When children's rights are acknowledged, due weight is given to their views and children are actively involved in shaping the school community, including their learning (EHRC, 2020; UNICEF

UK, 2024). Furthermore, when children have a say in decisions that affect them, they feel valued and empowered and have a relatively greater sense of ownership of their school experiences (UNICEF UK, 2024; Winch, 2020).

6. Improved safeguarding and feelings of safety

An RRS approach supports children to feel safe at school and to be able to voice concerns if they feel unsafe in or out of school, leading to improved safeguarding (UNICEF UK, 2020; 2024).

Knowing about their rights also helps children to recognise and take action when there are rights violations within their lives and the lives of others (Struthers, 2021). Additionally, when children understand that adults are duty bearers who will intervene to protect their rights, and adults in schools know about children's rights and the action to take to protect these rights, this empowers children to voice concerns about situations where rights are at risk of not being upheld (Struthers, 2021; UNICEF, 2024).

2. Methodology

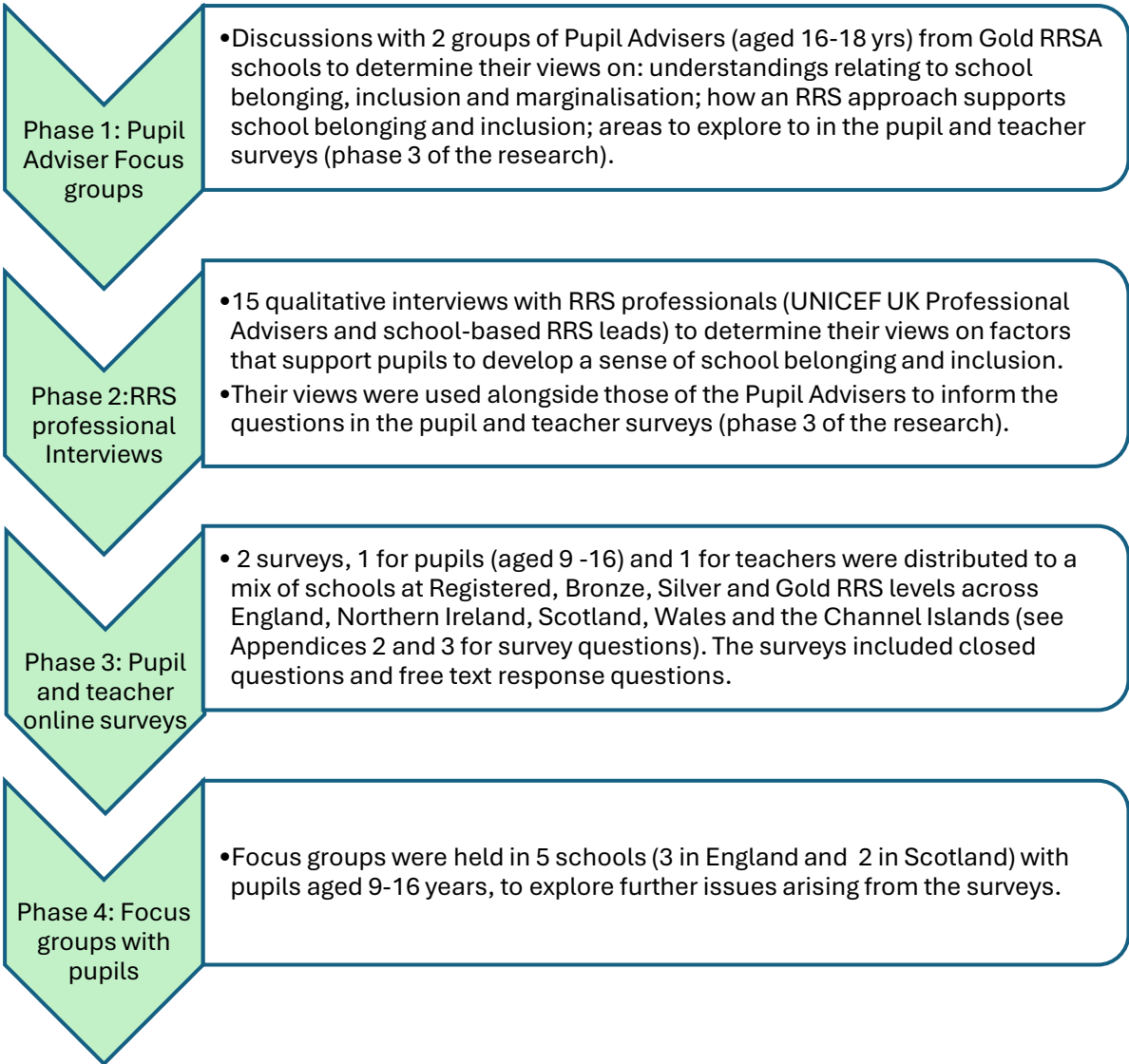
2.1 Overview of project design

The study took place between October 2024 and November 2025. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a purposive sample of pupils, teachers and school leaders in schools across the UK registered for UNICEF UK’s RRSA, and from UNICEF UK’s RRS Professional Advisers. All participants had firsthand experience of UNICEF UK’s RRS approach and were well-placed to offer their perspectives on the impact of implementing the approach in schools.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Strathclyde’s Institute of Education Ethics Committee.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

A sequential mixed design approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009) was adopted with early phases of the research informing subsequent phases. This enabled data collection instruments and techniques to be refined as the research progressed (Creswell et al., 2008). The following diagram outlines the data collected and the iterative nature of the data collection process.



As a starting point for the development of ideas for the pupil and teacher surveys, the Pupil Adviser groups were presented with questions from a pupil survey designed by UNICEF UK to measure the impact of the RRSAs. When designing the surveys for this research, the Pupil Adviser groups chose to base the layout of the surveys and to include some of the key metrics present in UNICEF UK’s RRSAs pupil questionnaire³.

The quantitative survey data was analysed to determine if there were differences in responses between pupils in schools with different RRSAs levels. The qualitative interviews, focus groups and open-ended survey questions were analysed to determine emerging themes in relation to the research aims.

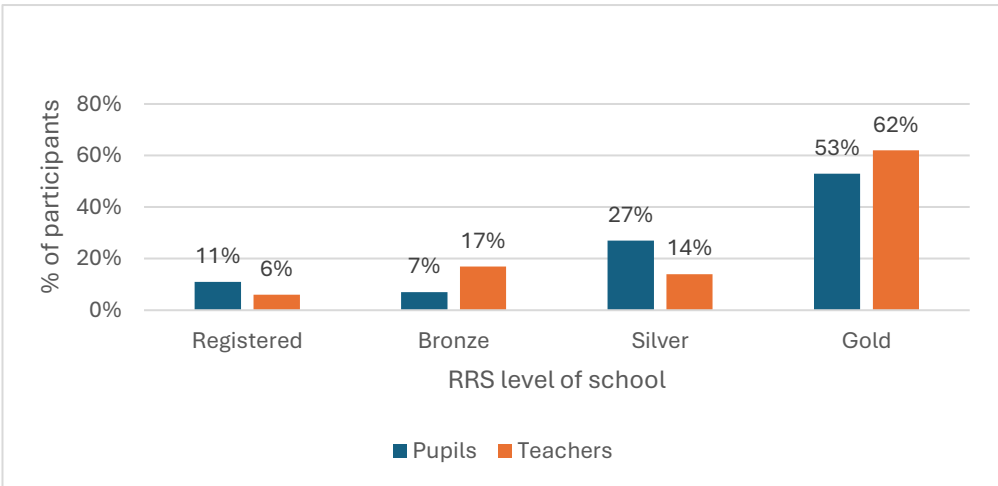
2.3 Research participants

Pupils and teachers who participated in interviews and focus groups attended Gold RRS schools, however, survey data was collected from pupils and teachers across a mix of schools at Registration, Bronze, Silver and Gold RRS levels.

2.3.1 Contextual information relating to the survey data

The Pupil survey received 420 responses and the Teacher survey 89 responses. Figure 1 below illustrates the percentage of respondents according to their school’s RRSAs level.

Figure 1: The school RRSAs level of pupils and teachers who responded to the surveys



As illustrated in Figure 1, of the 420 pupils and 89 teacher survey respondents, 53% of the pupils and 62% of teachers were from schools at Gold RRSAs level, with the remaining respondents spread across schools at Registered, Bronze and Silver RRSAs levels. Further contextual data relating to the survey respondents indicated:

- **The majority of pupils and teachers were from mainstream schools:**
 - 92% pupils and 91% teachers were from mainstream schools, 2% pupils and 2% teachers were from Pupil Referral Units or Alternative Education Provision, and the education establishments of the remaining pupils and teachers are unknown.
- **The majority of pupils and teachers were from schools in England:**
 - 73% pupils and 82% teachers were from schools in England; 21% pupils and 9% teachers from schools in Wales; and 6% pupils and 9% teachers from schools in Scotland; 1 pupil respondent (but no teachers) was from the Channel Islands and 1 from Northern Ireland.

³ Link to [UNICEF UK’s RRSAs pupil questionnaire](#) (accessed 27.03.2026)

- **The majority of pupils and teachers were from schools located in towns:**
 - 67% pupils and 61% teachers were from schools located in towns; 18% pupils and 11% teachers from inner city schools; 7% pupils and 17% teachers from schools on the outskirts of cities; and 9% pupils and 11% teachers from village or countryside schools.
- **An equal mix of males and females responded to the pupil survey:**
 - 48% pupil responses were from male respondents and 48% from female respondents; the gender of the remaining respondents is unknown.
- **Almost three quarters of teachers taught in a primary or first schools:**
 - 72% teachers taught in primary or first schools; 13% in secondary or high schools; 8% in pre-schools or nurseries; 1% in all-through schools; and the phase taught by 6% of respondents is unknown.
- **52% pupil were aged 9-10 years; 45% aged 11-14 years; and 3% were aged 15 years +.**

The age group of pupils suggests that the survey responses include a good mix of pupils from primary and secondary schools. Figure 2 below provides details of the breakdown of the age group of pupils in schools at different RRSA levels.

Figure 2: To illustrate the breakdown by RRSA level and year group of the pupils who responded to the survey⁴

School RRSA level	9-10 years	11-12 years	13-14 years	15+ years
Registered ward	19	10	12	6
Bronze award	10	15	7	0
Silver award	55	21	36	1
Gold award	130	78	5	5
Total	214	124	60	12

As illustrated above in Figure 2, the highest proportion of responses from any one group were those from pupils aged 9-10 years in Gold RRSA schools (just over 30% of responses were from this group). However, pupils from a mix of age groups and from schools with different RRSA levels also made valuable contributions to the research.

2.4 Limitations of the research

It is recognised that research findings detailed in this report draw on the views of a small proportion pupils and teachers who have experience of attending and working in an RRS, and where there are a small numbers of participants in any one age and RRSA group (e.g. 5 pupils aged 13-14 in Gold RRSA schools responded to the survey), it is possible that the findings relate to pupils from only one school. Additionally, no comparisons are made with pupils and staff in non-Rights Respecting schools, and the research did not track changes in participants' perspectives over a length of time as their schools worked to embed an RRS approach, rather the findings present a snapshot of participants' perspectives at a moment in time. However, a significant strength of the research is the key role played by children in the design of the research and in their contribution to the qualitative findings. Pupil Advisers identified the areas to explore in relation to school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation, and in-depth discussions with pupils (and staff) offered deep insights into their perceptions of how an RRS approach impacts on pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion.

⁴ The total number of pupil respondents does not add up to 420 as 5 pupils aged 9-10 years, and 3 pupils aged 13-14 years did not enter their school's RRSA level and the RRSA level and year group for 2 participants is not known.

3. Findings: Understandings relating to the concepts school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation

Within this section findings relating to understandings associated with school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation are presented. It is acknowledged that these understandings are not directly related to a school's Rights Respecting approach, however, they are included to provide a context for how these terms were understood by participants involved in the research. Data were drawn from discussions with pupils, including the Pupil Advisers, school staff and UNICEF UK Professional Advisers, and from comments made by pupils and teachers in the open text questions within the pupil and teacher surveys. Quotes are used throughout to highlight points made by the participants⁵.

3.1 School belonging

3.1.1 Defining school belonging

Pupils described school belonging as something they felt emotionally. It differed from that of inclusion, which was associated more with school policies and practices put in place in an attempt to include pupils within the school community.

Belonging is about how you feel mentally, about feeling you belong. (Pupil Adviser, aged 16-18, Gold RRS)

Belonging is produced through inclusion; it is a feeling that comes as a result of inclusion. (Pupil Adviser, aged 16-18, Gold RRS)

3.1.2 Factors integral to school belonging

Pupils identified the following four factors as integral to feeling a sense of school belonging:

1. A feeling of fitting into and being an established member of the school community.
2. Feeling wanted, valued, liked, cared for and having mutually trusting relationships with adults and peers.
3. Having a voice, feeling safe to voice opinions and feeling listened to and respected by adults and peers.
4. Feeling unjudged and safe to be oneself.

Each factor is discussed below.

1. A feeling of fitting into and being an established member of the school community

Significant to pupils having a sense of school belonging was feeling that they fit into and were an established member of the school community. This was supported by having shared interests, values and understandings with adults and participating in joint activities with peers.

Where you feel like it is made for you, like you fit right in and the people are bothered about you. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

⁵ Quotes from Pupil Advisers as labelled as such. Quotes from pupil participants are referred to as 'Pupil' followed by the age range of the pupil and the RRS level of their school. School-based RRS leads, UNICEF UK Professional Advisers and all other professionals working in or with UNICEF UK's RRS in London are referred to collectively as 'RRS professionals', however, quotes from teachers and school-based RRS leads are labelled 'RRS professional' followed by the age category of pupils they teach (Primary or Secondary) and their school's RRS level.

When you belong it's like you feel you're a piece of the puzzle. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

2. Feeling wanted, valued, liked, cared for and having mutually trusting relationships with adults and peers

Feeling confident that they were wanted, valued, liked and cared for by adults and peers in school helped pupils to develop a sense of belonging. This was further enhanced when pupils had close friendship groups and trusting relationships with peers and adults in school. Additionally, being trusted by teachers contributed towards pupils' feelings of belonging, for example, having opportunities to choose their own level of work or undertaking roles of responsibility within school. Pupils cited the following:

It's when you feel like you're meant to be here and you are wanted. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

Having teachers who care for everyone equally. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

Having friends you can trust. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

Having classroom jobs because that makes you feel important and that you're trusted with responsibility. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

3. Having a voice, feeling safe to voice opinions and feeling listened to and respected by adults and peers

Having a voice and feeling their opinions are listened to and their contributions are respected by adults and peers in school played a significant role in enhancing pupils' sense of school belonging. Pupils acknowledged that feeling listened to and feeling safe to voice their opinion had resonance with feeling valued and one cannot exist without the other.

Belonging is when ... everyone gets their opinion listened to. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

When teachers want to listen to you and you have a say in things; like they really listen and want to hear what you think. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

Aligned to pupils having a voice and feeling listened to is the need to feel safe to voice their opinions, even where these differ from the views of others (see point below).

4. Feeling unjudged and safe to be oneself

Feeling safe to be oneself in school was primarily associated with pupils' emotional safety, whereby pupils knew they would not be ridiculed, laughed at or hurt emotionally. Pupils expressed that to feel safe to be oneself, including feeling un-judged and confident, they needed to feel that they are respected by adults and pupils in school, regardless of any unique characteristics or viewpoints.

When you belong, you feel safe in that place. (Pupil Adviser, aged 16-18, Gold RRS)

I have autism so being in a Special Needs School is best for me because in my other school I was different to everyone but here everyone is different, so everyone is accepted. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

3.2 School inclusion

3.2.1 Defining school inclusion

Pupils described school inclusion as relating to measures purposefully implemented by adults in school with the aim of recognising and accommodating pupils' needs, integrating pupils into the school community, and supporting pupils to participate in school activities.

Inclusion is about the measures schools take to help include everyone. (Pupil Adviser, aged 16-18, Gold RRS)

Inclusion is ... about what is in place to help you feel you belong. (Pupil Adviser, aged 16-18, Gold RRS)

3.2.2 Factors integral to school inclusion

Pupils felt included when the following four factors were in place:

1. Adults in school demonstrate recognition, acceptance and accommodation of pupils' needs, preferences and values.
2. School strategies encourage pupils to connect and communicate with each other.
3. Adults in school treat all pupils fairly and ensure pupils have equal access to opportunities.
4. Pupils support each other to participate in activities inside and outside of the classroom.

Each factor is discussed below.

1. Adults in school demonstrate recognition, acceptance and accommodation of pupils' needs, preferences and values

Pupils placed importance on adults in school being accepting of the diverse attributes, values, characteristics and preferences of all pupils, including their own personal and unique characteristics. They also valued teachers tailoring support to the needs of individual pupils, including accommodating pupils' personal preferences and individual learning needs.

[We have] seating plans because the teacher knows who you work well with, so you don't feel left out, and you don't struggle because you're by yourself. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

An inclusive environment ... is where something [about an individual's characteristics] viewed as weird or different becomes part of the norm. (Pupil Adviser, aged 16-18, Gold RRS)

[At lunch] there is food for vegetarians and there are always options. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

Teachers described how efforts were made to ensure the curriculum, texts and learning content represented different cultures, backgrounds and pupils' unique characteristics, and how pupils identities were celebrated through themed events and activities. Additionally, pupils and teachers placed importance on an inclusive environment celebrating pupils' abilities and talents.

They are praised for their own personal achievements. (RRS professional, Primary, Gold RRS)

[They see] ... that education goes beyond grades and that they are valued for who they are, not just what grades they get. (RRS professional, Secondary Gold RRS)

2. School strategies encourage pupils to connect and communicate with each other

Strategies that encouraged pupils to connect, communicate and mix with each other were implemented with the aim of nurturing friendships and supporting all pupils to feel included, particularly those who were considered at risk of feeling marginalised. For example, many schools introduced Play Buddies, Bench Buddies and Talking Partners schemes.

We help friends if they are lonely ... we have Play Buddies and Bench Buddies. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

We look at strategies to nurture friendships and build strong relationships, this in turn enhances inclusion around school. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

3. Adults in school treat all pupils fairly and ensure pupils have equal access to opportunities

Pupils placed importance on all pupils being treated fairly and having equal access to opportunities in school.

[Inclusion is] ... everyone having an opportunity to be part of something. (Pupil Adviser, aged 16-18, Gold RRS)

We do Signing Choir where we do Makaton, so we sign when we sing so if you can't hear, you can still join in. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

A small number of pupils, however, expressed concern that some adults in school did not treat all pupils fairly.

...teachers [should] treat each gender equally and not let one gender such as girls have one thing better than boys. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

4. Pupils support each other to participate in activities inside and outside of the classroom

Feelings of inclusion were enhanced when pupils had equal access to activities inside and outside of the classroom, for example, being able to join in with activities during lessons and participate in games during break times and in extra-curricular activities. In contrast, however, pupils also spoke about the importance of being able to access calmness, quietness and to be alone in school when they wanted or needed this.

3.3 Marginalisation in school

3.3.1 Defining marginalisation

Marginalisation was described by pupils as an emotional feeling experienced when they feel excluded or left out.

3.3.2 Factors that contribute to feelings of marginalisation

Pupils identified the following three factors as contributing to feelings of marginalisation in school:

1. Feeling different to others.
2. Feeling unrepresented, victimised or discriminated against.
3. Feeling socially excluded, unaccepted or not good enough.

Each factor is discussed below.

1. Feeling different to others

Feeling different to others in relation to marginalisation always had negative connotations and was the most prominent characteristic associated with feeling marginalised. Pupils acknowledged that feeling different to others could be an outcome of how pupils are treated by others, or it could be

self-imposed through pupils holding negative perceptions about themselves or seeing themselves as different to others.

When you feel you are not the same. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

I have social anxiety ... [because of] my likings and the way I act/my personality, I feel like I'm the odd one in everything. I'm different. (Pupil aged 12-15, Silver RRS)

2. Feeling unrepresented, victimized or discriminated against

Pupils felt unrepresented or victimised when discriminatory comments were directed at them and when they felt teachers 'picked on' them.

Being victimized and not being seen as equal or the same [as others]. (Pupil Adviser, aged 16-18, Gold RRS).

[Teachers] picking on students or putting them on the spot. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

Unnecessary referrals, it feels like an abuse of [teacher] power. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

3. Feeling socially excluded, unaccepted or not good enough

Feeling socially excluded, unaccepted or not good enough were also strongly associated with feelings of marginalisation and led to pupils having a low self-esteem.

Not having anyone to play or hang out with at lunch and break times. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

Always being the last person picked in groups. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

Not being in the trends not being pretty enough. (Pupil aged 12-15, Bronze RRS)

Pupils also expressed how the actions of some teachers could lead to them feeling excluded, unaccepted or not good enough.

Teachers never picking you for anything. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

Teachers who treat the smarter kids better or give them extra maths questions making us feel [not good enough]. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

3.3.3 Pupils identified as marginalised or at risk of marginalisation

When pupils and teachers were asked which groups of pupils are most likely to feel marginalised or at risk of marginalisation in school, they identified the following groups:

Pupils identified as most likely to be at risk of marginalisation were those who:

- have high rates of absenteeism.
- frequently change schools.
- arrive at school mid-year and struggle to settle in.
- have difficulty accessing the curriculum, including pupils with additional learning needs and physical disabilities, and pupils who have English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- experience social or emotional difficulties.
- are from families on very low incomes and who do not have the same material possessions as others in school.
- feel isolated due to feeling their out of school experiences are different to those of others.
- have limited life aspirations.
- feel their cultural beliefs are not understood or represented.
- do not feel safe to express themselves.
- are LGBT pupils.

Teachers acknowledged that an RRS approach cannot reach pupils who do not attend school regularly, however, they reported that their school's RRS approach had a high likelihood of reaching and having a positive impact on several groups of pupils classified as marginalised or at risk of marginalisation. They cited that this was due to these pupils experiencing being treated with respect by adults and peers in school, having their needs and preferences accommodated for and, crucially, having a trusted adult in school they felt able to approach and speak to.

3.4 Feelings associated with a lack of school belonging

Closely aligned to feelings of marginalisation were feelings associated with a lack of school belonging. Pupils spoke at length about the impact of a lack of school belonging, hence a specific section is dedicated to this. They felt strongly a lack of school belonging reduced school enjoyment and led to pupils feeling 'like an outsider', 'upset', 'angry', 'frustrated' and 'anxious'.

Pupils identified the following four factors as working against developing a sense of school belonging:

1. Poor relationships with peers.
2. Feeling judged by peers.
3. Adults in school not showing care or kindness towards pupils.
4. Not being listened to by adults in school.

Each factor is illustrated below using quotes from pupils; all quotes are from pupils in Gold RRS.

1. Poor relationships with peers:

Not having any friends. (Pupil aged 8-11)

Being bullied or called names. (Pupil aged 8-11)

A lot of negativity and people not helping each other. (Pupil aged 8-11)

Not being noticed and people not being nice to you. (Pupil aged 12-15)

2. Feeling judged by peers:

Not feeling accepted for being yourself. (Pupil aged 12-15)

Feeling nervous around people because you're frightened in case people laugh at you if you say something they don't agree with. (Pupil aged 8-11)

Feeling self-conscious because of how you look or because something about you is different from other people. (Pupil aged 8-11)

Feeling left out in games if you can't do something very well and everyone is better than you. (Pupil aged 12-15)

3. Adults in school not showing care or kindness towards pupils:

Teachers judging you on results or first impressions and then not bothering about you. (Pupil aged 12-15)

Teachers not being kind to you. (Pupil aged 8-11)

Dinner ladies just putting the food on your plate and not talking to you. (Pupil aged 8-11)

4. Not being listened to by adults in school:

Teachers being strict about your clothing and telling you off just because your uniform isn't right, but they don't know why it isn't right. (Pupil aged 8-11)

Asking for help and then being ignored. (Pupil aged 12-15)

4. Findings: The impact of UNICEF UK’s RRSA on pupils’ feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation

The previous section provided an overview of participants’ understanding of the concepts school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation. Building on these understandings, this section focuses on findings from the research relating to how an RRS approach impacts on pupils’ feelings of belonging, inclusion and marginalisation in school. These findings are categorised into two areas as follows:

- (i) The relationship between a school’s RRSA level and pupils’ feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation: findings from the survey data.
- (ii) The impact of an RRS approach on pupils’ feelings school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation: findings from the qualitative data.

4.1 The relationship between a school’s RRSA level and pupils’ feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation: findings from the survey data

The pupil and teacher surveys included statements directly associated with pupils’ sense of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation. Pupils were asked to respond ‘Yes’, ‘Sometimes’, ‘Not sure’ or ‘No’ to a series of statements and their responses were analysed according to the RRSA level of their school. Responses to the following three statements, developed by the Pupil Advisers, were intended to give an overview of pupils’ feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation:

- I feel like I belong
- School makes an effort to include all pupils
- Some pupils feel left out in school

Pupils’ responses to these statements are illustrated in figures 3-5 below.

Figure 3: Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘I feel like I belong’ according to their school’s RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘I feel like I belong’			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	72%	15%	4%	9%
Bronze award	48%	35%	3%	13%
Silver award	40%	41%	4%	14%
Gold award	73%	23%	0%	3%

Figure 4: Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘School makes an effort to include all pupils’ according to their school’s RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘School makes an effort to include all pupils’			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	67%	17%	7%	9%
Bronze award	69%	19%	6%	6%
Silver award	65%	27%	4%	4%
Gold award	81%	13%	4%	2%

Figure 5: Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘Some pupils feel left out in school’ according to their school’s RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘Some pupils feel left out in school’			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	39%	22%	13%	26%
Bronze award	32%	50%	16%	3%
Silver award	32%	49%	9%	10%
Gold award	19%	46%	16%	20%

As illustrated in Figures 3, 4 and 5 above, pupils attending Gold RRSA schools were more likely than those in Registered, Bronze or Silver RRSA schools to report that they felt like they belong in school and that their school makes an effort to include all pupils. They were also the least likely to report that some pupils feel left out in their school. Figure 3, however, indicates that a similar percentage of pupils from Gold and Registered Rights Respecting schools reported feeling like they belong in school (73% and 72% respectively). Thus, survey data did not show a steady increase in pupils feeling more positive about aspects of school belonging, inclusion and lack of marginalisation to reflect schools progressing from Registered to Gold RRSA level. Initial conversations with teachers suggest that this may be accounted for by pupils and teachers developing a relatively deeper understanding of children’s rights as schools progress through the RRSA levels and, as a result, adopting a more critical perspective about their application in practice. However, caution needs to be exercised with this initial finding as the survey sample of 420 pupils is relatively small and it could be, for example, that RRS leads in Registered schools with an already inclusive environment were more likely than other Registered schools to invite pupils to complete the survey.

Responses to the majority of the remaining survey statements associated with school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation also illustrated more positive responses from pupils in Gold RRSA schools than from those in Registered, Bronze or Silver RRSA schools.

Pupils in Gold RRSA schools were the most likely to report:

- Teachers were interested in them (see Appendix 4 Table 1).
- Pupils respected each other (see Appendix 4 Table 2).
- They felt proud of who they were (see Appendix 4 Table 3).
- Their needs were met so they can join in at school (see Appendix 4 Table 4).
- Different cultures and backgrounds were celebrated in their school (joint highest with pupils in Registered RRS) (see Appendix 4 Table 5).
- Different abilities and talents were celebrated in their school (see Appendix 4 Table 6).
- Pupils were treated fairly by adults in school (see Appendix 4 Table 7).

Pupils in Gold RRSA schools were also the least likely to report:

- Bullying happens/sometimes happens in school (see Appendix 4 Table 8).

For two of the statements, ‘My views are listened to by adults in school’ and ‘My rights are respected by adults in school’, the responses illustrated that pupils from Gold RRSA schools did not respond most positively, however, there was very little difference between any of the pupils’ responses to these statements (see Appendix 4 Tables 9 and 10).

Teachers were invited to respond to statements on the Teachers’ survey which asked them to rate how effectively their school supported pupils in relation to different aspects of school belonging and inclusion. These statements had many similarities with those on the Pupil survey and in all cases, teachers’ responses were more positive than those of pupils, indicating that teachers were more likely than pupils to view pupils as having a strong sense of school belonging and inclusion.

Of note, pupils in Gold RRS schools were the most likely to report that they enjoyed school and the least likely to report that they did not enjoy school (see Appendix 4 Table 11). Similarly, teachers in Gold RRS schools were the most likely to strongly agree that they enjoy working at their school (see Appendix 4 Table 12).

4.2 The impact of an RRS approach on pupils' feelings of school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation: findings from the qualitative data

Drawing on evidence from focus groups with the Pupil Advisers and pupil participants, interviews with RRS professionals and data from the free text responses in the pupil and teacher surveys, findings associated with the impact of an RRS approach can be categorised into two distinct categories:

- (i) School-wide impact.
- (ii) The impact on pupils individually.

Factors associated with the impact of an RRS approach on supporting pupils' feelings of belonging and inclusion

The following four factors were identified as outcomes that have a school-wide impact:

1. The whole school community is unified through having shared knowledge of children's rights.
2. School policies and practices create an inclusive environment through reflecting pupils' diverse backgrounds, characteristics and experiences.
3. A school-wide ethos is grounded in Rights Respecting values and fosters a cohesive school culture.
4. A shared Rights Respecting language enables behaviour management, conflict resolution and issues of a controversial nature to be dealt with through a Rights Respecting lens.

A strong theme that emerged from the data was the positive impact of learning about children's rights. The following seven factors were identified as outcomes of an RRS approach, particularly learning about rights, that impact on pupils individually:

1. Pupils feel united through knowing all pupils in school share the same rights.
2. Pupils recognise they have a right to an education.
3. Pupils have increased self-respect and self-confidence through knowing that rights are unconditional and apply to all children.
4. Pupils have increased understanding of the rights and needs of others.
5. Pupils feel empowered to express feelings and to advocate for themselves and others.
6. Pupils have an enhanced sense of agency.
7. Pupils have an enhanced sense of safety.

4.2.1 The impact of an RRS approach on supporting pupils' feelings of belonging and inclusion: school wide impact

1. The whole school community is unified through having shared knowledge of children's rights
When pupils and adults had a shared knowledge and understanding of children's rights and rights values this played a significant role in unifying the school community and supporting pupils to develop feelings of school belonging and inclusion. It encouraged a culture of respect and acceptance of individuals' rights and formed a basis upon which foundational and shared understandings of the concepts of fairness, equality and equity were built. Pupils felt empowered through knowing they and others have rights that are universal and cannot be taken away.

We talk about our rights and talk about what they really mean, and it means we know that everyone has rights no matter who you are, so it makes us all the same. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

[Pupils] feel empowered [knowing they have rights] ... they have different backgrounds, they have different cultures, but they have the same rights as others. (RRS professional, Secondary Gold RRS)

2. School policies and practices create an inclusive environment through reflecting pupils' diverse backgrounds, characteristics and experiences

In Rights Respecting schools, policies and practices intentionally aim to create an inclusive environment and to remove barriers that might obstruct individuals or groups from participating; this supports pupils to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Schools don't just aim for equality but actively work towards removing barriers that prevent full participation ... schools send a clear message that every child belongs. (RRS professional)

Teachers described how measures were implemented to help pupils feel included and proud of their identities through, for example, promoting awareness of diverse cultural and religious practices, acknowledging and celebrating individual identities and unique characteristics, and challenging any counter attitudes.

[Pupils] learn about and celebrate all cultures, especially the cultures our pupils are part of. All differences are celebrated and children understand the importance of respecting everyone. Pupils' work is always celebrated. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

Since we've been doing the RRS award ... we have been doing activities that are focused on non-discrimination and giving them [pupils] voices and opportunities to speak out and tell people about their cultures. (RRS professional, Secondary Gold RRS)

We talk about non-discrimination, about diversity, and that has come through the approach to our Rights Respecting work ... children challenge stereotypes, challenge bullying and challenge discrimination. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

3. A school-wide ethos is grounded in Rights Respecting values and fosters an inclusive culture

For an RRS approach to be embedded there needs to be commitment from the school leadership team and teachers, and school policies and practices grounded in children's rights need to be embraced by all staff.

As a staff we embrace it [RRS approach] and it's made a big difference to the school, but everyone has to buy in to it for it to work, it's got to be across the school. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

When schools adopted an RRS approach this served as a guiding principle that shaped the school ethos and practice. The approach fostered a respectful, inclusive and cohesive school culture.

We live and breathe Rights Respecting everywhere. Ofsted said they've never been to a school quite like ours where all the conversations were based on mutual respect, no matter who you spoke to, to children, to teachers, to parents ... There is a real sense of inclusion. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

Being Rights Respecting allows our students to understand that everyone is accepted no matter who they are ... in fact it goes beyond being accepted ... they are celebrated. (RRS professional, Secondary Gold RRS)

4. A shared Rights Respecting language enables behaviour management, conflict resolution and issues of a controversial nature to be dealt with through a rights respecting lens

Teachers and school leaders spoke about how pupils developed a shared vocabulary and language through which they could articulate their views in a Rights Respecting way. The shared Rights Respecting language promoted a sense of school belonging and supported conflict resolution to be approached through consistently referencing rights. Pupils and teachers also highlighted that a Rights Respecting language enabled issues of behaviour management to be approached through having consideration and respect for the rights and dignity of others. Moreover, it enabled pupils and adults to talk through issues of a controversial nature from a Rights Respecting perspective, rather than from cultural, religious or other non-rights focused perspectives. Dealing with such issues in a constructive way, and using a consistently applied rights framework, further promoted unity across the school community.

4.2.2 The impact of an RRS approach, and learning about children's rights, in supporting feelings of belonging and inclusion: the impact on pupils individually

When talking to pupils about the impact of an RRS approach, a recurring theme was the positive impact that learning about children's rights had on their sense of school belonging and inclusion. When asked directly about how learning about rights changed how they feel at school, the most common responses were that pupils felt more respected and more confident through knowing their voice was important. The following seven factors highlight how an RRS approach, and specifically learning about rights, impacted on pupils' feelings of school belonging and inclusion.

1. Pupils feel united through knowing all pupils in school share the same rights

When pupils knew and understood they have rights that are universal and shared by all children, they felt a connection with other pupils.

[Learning about rights] makes us feel more included because we all have the same rights.
(Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

[RRSA] brings us together as a community and helps unite people. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

Through learning about rights our children have understood more about their own identity and the identity of others. They have come to realise that although someone may be different from them in many ways, they still have the same rights as them and that helps them realise they belong together at the school. (RRS professional, Primary Bronze RRS)

2. Pupils recognise they have a right to an education

Pupils recognised their entitlement to education and acknowledged that this is an inherent right for themselves and others, rather than something that is granted to them.

Without a doubt ... the Rights Respecting work has made children value education more as they realise how fortunate they are. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

One pupil described how, since attending a Pupil Referral Unit, their education is more suited to their needs.

There is one article about education, and we have the right to get our own level of education. We get a better level of education here than in other schools as our education suits our needs. We all have our own learning ladder that the teachers set for us, and they help us with what is right for each of us; it's not like other schools where the whole class learns the same thing. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

3. Pupils have increased self-respect and self-confidence

Knowing that rights are unconditional and apply to all children, including themselves, enhanced pupils' feelings of self-respect and confidence. Moreover, when schools adopted an RRS approach, pupils knew that they were intrinsically valued in school and that adults in school were duty bearers who would respect their rights.

I feel like I have meaning when I have rights. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

[Knowing I have rights] makes me feel more confident and relaxed. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

Rights help children to develop their own sense of self-respect, which then feeds into their own behaviour towards their peers. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

4. Pupils have increased understanding of the rights and needs of others

Gaining an understanding of children's rights helped pupils to be accepting of characteristics that are different to their own. It supported pupils to understand the needs and preferences of others, to acknowledge diversity across the school and it contributed directly to building positive peer relationships through encouraging positive, respectful behaviour towards others.

School has taught me how important it is to respect others and their rights; no matter who you are, you are special and unique in your own perfect way. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

[Learning about rights] shows me that everyone should be equal and should be treated as such. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

Pupils developed empathy towards others as they gained an increased understanding of other pupils' personal situations that were often different from their own.

[Learning about rights] makes me feel like I can understand people more and respect them by being understanding towards them. (Pupil aged 12-15, Silver RRS)

Teachers also commented that pupils' increased understanding of other peoples' needs helped them to be more accepting of the diverse needs of others both in and out of school.

By learning about their own and others' rights, children can consider the positions that other people may be in if their rights are not being upheld. This supports children's understanding of others and develops their empathy. (RRS professional, Primary Bronze RRS)

5. Pupils feel empowered to express feelings and to advocate for themselves and others

Through learning about children's rights pupils knew they had a voice and the right to have a say in matters that affect them. This knowledge, coupled with children having a shared vocabulary and language through which they could articulate their views in a Rights Respecting way, gave pupils the confidence to voice their opinions and to raise questions.

I know I have rights now so I can tell people if there's problems. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

Children gain confidence to ask questions about the things they are told. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

Knowing about their rights also empowered pupils to express their feelings, to challenge situations where it is apparent there is a lack of respect, to stand up for what they know is right and to advocate for themselves and others.

I feel I can speak up for myself and know what my rights are. (Pupil aged 8-11, Silver RRS)

Pupils feel more empowered knowing their rights, so if they feel disrespected [or] ... if their rights or others are being violated ... [they] can stand up for themselves. (Pupil aged 12-15, Registered RRS)

When children understand their rights, they are able to communicate when their rights are and are not being met. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

A key advantage of the RRS approach is that it empowers students to advocate for themselves and others. (RRS professional, Secondary Gold RRS)

6. Pupils have an enhanced sense of agency

Learning about rights helped to position pupils as agents of change as pupils knew they had a right to voice their opinion in matters affecting them. Adults and pupils talked about how being involved in school decision-making enhanced pupils' sense of agency.

It gives me confidence to talk to teachers. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

It has shown me that what I say is important and that I am important. (Pupil aged 12-15, Gold RRS)

Learning about rights has empowered them [pupils] and ensured that their views and opinions are valid and should be listened to and respected. (RRS professional, Primary Silver RRS)

[Pupils have an] understanding that they can be involved in decision making but also knowing that, whilst their views are taken into account, they may not only always get their way. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

7. Pupils have an increased sense of safety

When pupils knew and understood their rights and felt valued in school, this created a sense of personal reassurance resulting in pupils feeling safe within the school environment.

[Knowing about rights] ... makes me feel safer and belong more. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

We can say what we think, and we can talk to teachers privately and they help us. (Pupil aged 12-14, Gold RRS)

When children understand that they have the right to be safe, heard, included and treated fairly, they are more likely to feel secure and confident within their school environment. (RRS professional, Primary, Gold RRS)

Additionally, where pupils knew that they had a right to be safe and protected from harm, this led to increased disclosures and children feeling empowered to report issues of concern.

We know everyone has a voice so we are not afraid to share our voices, so we feel safe because we can say things. (Pupil aged 8-11, Gold RRS)

When children understand their rights, they are able to communicate when their rights are and are not being met. They feel listened to and know all adults are duty bearers, who are there to support and care for them. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

5. Challenges associated with ensuring an RRS approach supports all pupils to develop a sense of school belonging and inclusion

Throughout this section findings relating to the challenges associated with ensuring all children, including those identified as marginalised, develop a sense of school belonging and inclusion are presented. Evidence is drawn from focus groups with pupils, interviews teachers and other RRS Professionals, and from responses to the free text questions in the pupil and teacher surveys. The challenges associated with ensuring an RRS approach supports all pupils to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school can be considered within two categories:

- (i) Factors that hinder the development of pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion.
- (ii) Challenges associated with ensuring an RRS approach reaches all pupils.

5.1 Factors that hinder the development of pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion

The following factors were identified as hindering the development of pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion:

1. High rates of school absenteeism.
2. Influences outside of school negatively impacting on pupils' acceptance of diversity.
3. Adults and pupils in school lacking awareness of the needs of some minority groups.
4. A lack of resources or staffing to support the inclusion and participation of all pupils.
5. Unconscious bias from adults and pupils leading to the marginalisation of some individuals and groups.

Each of these factors are discussed below.

1. High rates of school absenteeism

Developing a sense of inclusion and belonging for pupils who do not regularly attend school presents unique challenges. When children did not attend school, and they and their parents/carers did not respond to emails, letters, telephone calls or to home visits, it was difficult to reach those pupils and include them within the school community. Schools did not have the resources for staff to continue visiting the homes of non-attenders when they repeatedly did not answer the door, and such visits needed to be curtailed with the outcome that these pupils were marginalised from the school community.

Teachers perceived that reasons for pupils being regularly absent from school include pupils preferring the comfort of their own homes, often as a result of feeling anxious about some aspect of school; parents/carers wanting the company of their children at home; and pupils and their families not placing a positive emphasis on school education. Teachers and school leaders reported that non-attendance has been a growing problem since the COVID-19 pandemic and is particularly prevalent as pupils transition to secondary school, with the outcome that some children do not successfully make this transition.

2. Influences outside of school negatively impacting on pupils' acceptance of diversity

Teachers and pupils talked about influences from outside of school conflicting with a school's endeavours to develop an inclusive community that embraces diversity. For example, some teachers spoke about some parents/carers objecting to their children learning about sexual diversity and described how this led to difficulties in ensuring all pupils were accepting of those with diverse sexual orientations. Additionally, teachers cited that some pupils and their

parents/carers had strong, unmoveable views around their religious values and beliefs and found it difficult to accept other beliefs.

3. Adults and pupils in school lacking awareness of the needs of some minority groups

Topics covered in lessons, school activities and general conversations around the school can unintentionally exclude or marginalise some pupils. For example, pupils with care experience, or whose parents/carers may have severe mental health issues can feel marginalised when family values and the right to a family life are discussed in school and when they are asked to inform their parents/carers about school activities and events.

I don't know if young people are aware of the experiences of children in care or how to support them when talking about family values and the right to a family. Drawing attention to these rights could actually serve to marginalise these groups and make them feel isolated. (RRS professional, Secondary Gold RRS)

Where schools do not have a mix of pupils with diverse characteristics this can result in there being no, or a limited number, of pupils with whom some pupils can relate. Not having characteristics that are shared by others in school increases the likelihood of these pupils feeling marginalised.

It's really important we think with a bigger picture. We have got diversity in school, but it's limited ... We have to be outward-facing otherwise our children have limited experiences. (RRS professional, Primary Gold RRS)

4. A lack of resources or staffing to support the inclusion and participation of all pupils

Teachers and pupils reported that where pupils have additional needs due to disabilities, it was not unusual for there to be challenges with supporting these children to fully participate in lessons and school activities. This included, but was not limited to, pupils with mobility, visual and hearing disabilities, those with speech and language disorders and those with autistic spectrum disorder. Many of the challenges were related to a lack of staffing and a lack of staff training in a particular child's need or needs.

I've worked with schools trying to make sure that students with disabilities can fully engage in activities like school trips, but this requires additional planning and resources that some schools struggle to provide. (RRS professional)

In a small number of schools some inclusion policies were ad hoc 'add ons', rather than being fully integrated into the school culture. For example, in one school staff talked about a tokenistic approach to supporting minority cultures to feel included through holding a one-off assembly relating to the cultural characteristics and values of a particular group. A teacher in another school noted that their school concentrated efforts on including particular cultural backgrounds and disabilities while overlooking the inclusion of some underrepresented groups.

5. Unconscious bias from adults and pupils leading to the marginalisation of some individuals and groups

A minority of adults in school mentioned that some staff placed different expectations on pupils due to staff's pre-conceived expectations about a pupil's ability or behaviour, and that some staff appeared to favour pupils whose background had resonance with their own personal background. Adults in school also faced challenges in balancing one child's rights with those of another child, especially around listening to and prioritising the views of pupils. Additionally, teachers cited that some pupils came to school with unconscious biases, especially where they received negative messages about different cultural and religious groups from outside of school.

5.2 Challenges associated with ensuring an RRS approach reaches all pupils

There were two groups of pupils identified by teachers and school leaders, for whom an RRS approach was considered to have minimal or limited impact:

- (i) The most difficult pupils to reach were those who do not attend school regularly, who frequently change schools, and EAL pupils. For each of these groups an RRS approach was considered not to reach or have only a minimal positive impact on pupils.
- (ii) An RRS approach was considered to reach but have a limited positive impact on pupils who were perceived to have low life aspirations or who were perceived to place little value on education.

Although there were challenges in ensuring an RRS approach reached some pupils classified as marginalised or at risk of marginalisation, there is strong evidence from this and previous research that adopting such an approach impacts positively on the vast majority of pupils, including pupils who feel left out, excluded, unrepresented, isolated or different to others. Teachers in this research reported that there was a high risk of these pupils either stopping attending school or displaying negative attitudes towards school. However, they cited that adopting an RRS approach played a significant role in preventing these outcomes through adults and pupils being understanding, accepting and respectful of diverse characteristics, through school policies and practices accommodating pupils' needs and preferences and, crucially, through pupils having a trusted adult in school they felt able to speak to.

6. Concluding comments

Findings from the research confirm much of what is already known about the impact of adopting an RRS approach (see Section 1.3.2 for details of existing evidence of the impact of an RRS), however, they also make a significant additional contribution in terms of deepening understanding about how an RRS approach supports pupils to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school.

6.1 Summary of findings: the impact of an RRS approach on developing feelings of school belonging and inclusion and minimising feelings of marginalisation

Evidence from this research indicates that adopting an RRS approach leads to the following outcomes associated with supporting pupils to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in school while also minimising feelings of marginalisation.

Pupils:

1. **Feel listened to by adults in school and know their views matter.** This was one of the most significant factors in supporting pupils to feel a sense of belonging.
2. **Feel connected to and united with other pupils through knowing that children's rights are universal and all pupils in school learn about and share the same rights.**
3. **Feel part of a unified school community.** Aligned to the point above, pupils feel part of a unified whole-school community through knowing that all adults and pupils in school have a shared understanding of children's rights and rights values, and shared understandings of the concepts of fairness, equality and equity. Feeling part of a unified community is further enhanced through having a shared Rights Respecting language throughout the school and through pupils knowing their school ethos endeavours to recognise and uphold the rights of all pupils.
4. **Recognise that education is an inherent right for themselves and others** rather than something that is granted to them and, as an outcome, pupils place value on their education.
5. **Feel intrinsically valued in school through knowing that all children, including themselves, have rights that are unconditional and cannot be taken away, and through knowing that adults in school are duty bearers who will respect their rights.** This combined knowledge enhances pupils' self-respect and confidence and reinforces the message that they, along with all other children, are valued for who they are and have a place in their school.
6. **Feel empowered to advocate for themselves and others through knowing about their rights, and through having access to a school-wide shared vocabulary and language as a conduit for expressing their views in a Rights Respecting way.**
7. **Develop an enhanced sense of agency in school.** When pupils know they have a right to have a say in matters affecting them this supports them to position themselves as agents of positive change in school.
8. **View themselves and others as rights holders.** Learning about rights encourages pupils to view themselves and others as rights holders, with the outcome that they feel connected and act more respectfully towards others.
9. **Feel proud of their identities.** This is supported through pupils being aware that the school makes an intentional effort to create an inclusive environment in which all unique characteristics are accepted, and leads to pupils feeling unjudged and safe to be themselves in school.

10. Feel safe in school, leading to an enhanced sense of personal reassurance. When pupils know they have rights and know school is a place where they are valued and where their rights are respected, this creates a sense of personal reassurance.
11. Experience adults demonstrating recognition, acceptance and accommodation of pupils' needs, preferences and values.
12. Experience, firsthand, themselves and others being treated fairly by adults in school.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 Recommendations to support the development of pupils' sense of school belonging and inclusion

To support pupils to develop a sense of school belonging and inclusion, the following measures associated with an RRS approach should be prioritised. Adults in school should ensure:

1. The views of all pupils are listened to and respected. This includes ensuring *all* pupils know and feel their views matter and feel emotionally safe to voice their opinions, regardless of whether or not their opinions are in line with the majority opinion and, crucially, ensuring pupils have at least one adult in school who they trust and can approach to voice any concerns.
2. Each pupil feels they have a place and 'fit into' the school environment. To achieve this, measures should be in place to accommodate the needs and preferences of pupils, and teachers and other adults in school should have the knowledge, experience and skills to support the diverse and often complex needs of pupils.
3. The school environment supports all pupils to feel proud of their identities through celebrating diversity and being respectful of pupils' background, culture, abilities and characteristics. This will support pupils to feel accepted and to develop a positive identity within school.
4. *All* pupils feel valued and cared for and form mutually trusting adult-pupil relationships. Pupils need to experience all pupils, including themselves, being treated fairly by adults in school.
5. Measures are in place to support pupils to mix with others and to participate jointly in school activities, particularly when pupils are at risk of feeling socially excluded.

6.2.2 Recommendations for further research

There is a need for further research to explore more deeply:

1. Factors that support (i) the development of trusting adult-pupil relationships in school; and (ii) pupils to feel valued and cared for in school.
2. Whether the reduction in pupils' positive feelings associated with school belonging and inclusion as schools progress from Registered through to Silver RRS levels is evident when a larger sample of schools is considered and, if so, the reason(s) for this temporary reduction.

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Appendix 1: Review of literature on school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation

Within educational settings belonging, inclusion and marginalisation play a crucial role in shaping pupils' experiences and development (Boyle et al., 2023). Although the concepts belonging, inclusion and marginalisation are often defined slightly differently, all are interrelated and have implications for educational practices and policies. Drawing from relevant literature, understandings relating to each of these terms are outlined below.

School belonging

One of the earliest definitions of school belonging stated that belonging relates to the

...extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others - especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment (Goodenow, 1993, 60-61).

While this definition still applies today (Sobitan, 2022), importance is also placed on feeling accepted by one's peers (Ellery, 2019; Jackson and Van Houtte, 2025). The concept of belonging is, therefore, deeper than physical presence and is linked to feelings of attachment, acceptance, positive relationships (St-Amand et al., 2017) and to social connections characterised by interpersonal trust and mutual respect (Allen, 2019). Pupils' experiences and social interactions at school impact on how well they view themselves as fitting in and, as a result, on their identity development (Brown et al., 2024). School belonging can, therefore, also be understood as '*a process through which students construct their identity in relation to others with the school and social context*' (Russell, 2022, 65). Kuttner (2023) extends this understanding further and describes school belonging as a combination of psychological, interpersonal, social, cultural and political processes. Thus, a sense of '*belonging in school is subjectively experienced by an individual*' (Brown et al., 2024, 77).

A significant contributory factor that is known to support the development children's sense of school belonging is positive teacher-pupil relationships (Dukynaite and Dudaite, 2017). For such relationships to form children need to feel valued, cared for, supported and welcome, and have mutually respectful relationships with teachers (Allen and Kern, 2017; Ellery, 2019). They also need to be treated fairly by adults and feel close to at least one adult in school they know they can turn to for support (Allen and Kern, 2017). Further contributory factors that support children's sense of belonging include feeling connected to others in school (Aldridge et al., 2016), having stable and positive relationships with peers, viewing school as important for their future lives (Allen and Kern, 2017; Osterman, 2000), and feeling proud of being part of the school (Osterman, 2000).

Although different pupils may place importance on different factors that enhance the feeling of belonging, when children feel a sense of school belonging this has a significant and positive impact. Feelings of belonging in school lead to increased happiness, self-esteem (Nutbrown and Clough, 2009; Watson, 2017), self-confidence, mental health and wellbeing (Allen and Kern, 2017; Corcoran and Kaneva, 2023; Parr et al., 2020), as well as improved academic motivation and achievement (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Positive feelings of school belonging are also associated with reductions in school absenteeism (Korpershoek et al., 2020; OECD, 2019), school dropout (McWhirter et al., 2018), risk-taking behaviour related to substance and tobacco use, early sexualisation (Allen and Kern, 2017) and feelings of alienation and isolation (Arslan et al., 2020).

Given the above benefits associated with a positive sense of school belonging, the need to develop feelings of belonging for all children cannot be underestimated. It is a '*a basic requirement to fully experience and optimise school life*' (Smith and Culbert, 2024, 30).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic there has been a sharp rise in children experiencing feelings of disconnection with school and this has contributed to increasing levels of poor mental health in children (Kauhanen et al., 2023).

School inclusion

Inclusion within education has been a part of the international education agenda for several decades. In 1994 the United Nation's (UN) Salamanca Statement (UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1994) advocated for inclusive education to recognise and address learners' unique characteristics, interests, abilities and needs within regular schools. As well as children having a right to access quality education, UNESCO now also recognises that children's participation is integral to their inclusion in education. In 2025 UNESCO asserted that:

...every child has unique interests, abilities and learning needs' and 'an inclusive approach to education means that each individual's needs are taken into account and that all learners participate and achieve together (UNESCO, 2025).

Additionally, in recent years the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), 2024) called on governments to ensure that inclusive and equitable quality education is available to all.

In the UK, children with diverse needs are commonly integrated into mainstream classrooms, rather than segregated into separate institutions (Booth and Ainscow, 2011; Florian et al., 2016). However, school inclusion is far more complex than simply attempting to integrate potentially vulnerable pupils into existing arrangements within mainstream schools. Inclusive education centres on including and valuing all learners as members of a school community. As noted above, children's participation is fundamental to school inclusion and opportunities need to be provided for all learners to actively participate (Corcoran and Kaneva, 2023). Thus, to fulfil children's rights to equity and to quality education school inclusion needs to promote and encourage academic achievement while also fostering the academic and social participation of each individual child (Ainscow, 2020; Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018).

School marginalisation

Understandings about school marginalisation are commonly rooted in a definition offered by the UN in 1996. The UN defined marginalisation as:

...the state of being considered unimportant, undesirable, unworthy, insignificant and different resulting in inequity, unfairness, deprivation and enforced lack of access to mainstream power (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 1996, cited in Messiou, 2017, 306).

Recent understandings emphasise the lack of equal access to be involved in a group, for example, marginalisation has been defined as:

...the act of excluding or ignoring a person or a group of people by relegating him/her to the outer edge of a group (Hajusoteriou et al., 2021, 1592).

Marginalisation can be an outcome of subtle practices shaped by unconscious biases, for example, where racialised and gendered assumptions affect how pupils are perceived, disciplined, and supported by adults in school (Gillborn, 2008). As well as pupils feeling marginalised as an outcome of how pupils and adults in school act towards them, the marginalisation of pupils can

also stem from school structural and organisational arrangements that separate and segregate pupils thereby preventing them from fully participating in the school community (Webster, 2022).

Groups commonly categorised as marginalised in schools include, but are not limited to: ethnic minority groups (Corcoran and Kaneva, 2023), in particular ethnic minority children from communities with a persistent history of underachievement (Myers and Bhopal, 2009; Tomlinson, 2015); children with a recognised disability (Messiou, 2016); children with additional support needs (Corcoran and Kaneva, 2023), including those who have English as an Additional Language (Monaghan, 2010); refugee children and those from displaced communities (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018); and perceived categories of children marginalised by their gender, language status and attendance levels (Messiou, 2016). There is also a strong correlation between children feeling marginalised and living in areas of socioeconomic deprivation (OECD, 2019).

Feeling marginalised in school is associated with negative outcomes including poor emotional well-being and aggression (Issmer and Wagner, 2015), and this detrimentally impacts on children's mental health and feelings towards school resulting in poor school performance (Raufelder et al., 2021).

Connections between school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation

The concepts belonging, inclusion and marginalisation have been discussed separately, however, they are interconnected and cannot be viewed in isolation. For example, policies and practices focusing on creating an inclusive environment are aimed at enhancing pupils' sense of belonging within the school community (Ainscow, 2020; Norwich, 2025) and are based on beliefs that everyone has value and is worthy of respect (Norwich, 2025). Moreover, fostering inclusive school communities and developing a sense of belonging is considered effective in countering school marginalisation (Messiou, 2016; Mowat, 2015). To add to the complexity, the term 'inclusion' is often used interchangeably with terms such as relatedness, connectedness, attachment and engagement (Allen and Bowles, 2012), with some of these words also being associated with belonging and marginalisation.

Furthermore, the concepts belonging, inclusion and marginalisation cannot be viewed as static or as having binary characteristics. Pupils do not simply feel they belong or do not belong, are included or not included, or are marginalised or not marginalised and remain that way across all of their school experiences. Pupils can experience being included or excluded (or feel they belong/do not belong or feel marginalised/not marginalised) to varying extents in different aspects of their school experiences (Qvortrup and Quovtrup, 2018). The numerous identities that children display throughout their school lives, coupled with their wide range of school experiences, results in multiple and ever-shifting levels of belonging, inclusion and marginalisation.

Appendix 2: Pupil Rights Respecting School Belonging and Inclusion survey

Questions 1-6 included questions about pupils': age group; gender; type of school attended (Mainstream, PRU/Alternative Provision, Other), school RRS level (Registered, Bronze, Silver, Gold); Geographical area of school (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Channel Islands); School location (Inner city, Outskirts of city, Town, Village or Countryside).

Question 7 asked pupils the following questions about how they feel in school:

	Yes	Sometimes	No	Not sure
Teachers are interested in me				
I feel like I belong				
My needs are met so I can join in at school				
School makes an effort to include all pupils				
My views are listened to by adults in school				
All pupil's views are listened to by adults in school				
I feel proud of who I am				
My rights are respected by adults in school				
All pupil's rights are respected by adults in school				
Pupils respect each other				
Some pupils feel left out in school				
Bullying sometimes happens in school				
Different cultures and backgrounds are celebrated in school				
Different abilities and talents are celebrated in school				
Pupils are treated fairly by adults in school				
I enjoy school				

The remaining questions included some open-ended questions and asked pupils:

- What could help you or others feel more included in your school?
- What might make some pupils feel left out in school?
- Has learning about rights changed how you feel at school (Yes, No, Not sure)
If yes, how has learning about rights changed how you feel at school?

Appendix 3: Teacher Rights Respecting School Belonging and Inclusion survey

Questions 1-5 included questions about teachers': school (Pre-school, Primary or First school, Middle school, Secondary or High school, All through, Other); type of school attended (Mainstream, PRU/Alternative Provision, Other), school RRS level (Registered, Bronze, Silver, Gold); Geographical area of school (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Channel Islands); School location (Inner city, Outskirts of city, Town, Village or Countryside).

Question 6 asked teachers the following questions about how they feel in school:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
I feel respected by other adults					
I feel respected by pupils					
Children's rights inform the approach taken by adults in school					
Pupils feel a sense of belonging in school					
Pupils respect each other					
Adults listen to the views of all pupils					
Pupil-pupil bullying sometimes happens					
The school makes an effort to include all pupils					
All pupils are treated fairly by adults in school					
Different cultures and backgrounds are celebrated in school					
Different abilities and talents are celebrated in school					
Some pupils feel left out in school					
I enjoy working in this school					

The remaining questions included some open-ended questions and asked teachers:

- What so you consider helps pupils to feel included in school?
- What do you consider makes pupils feel marginalised in school?
- Are any particular groups marginalised or at risk of marginalisation?
- Does learning about rights help children to develop a sense of belonging in school? (Yes, No, Not sure)
If yes, please state briefly why you think this is.

Appendix 4: Tables illustrating survey responses associated with the impact of a school’s RRSA level on feelings relating to school belonging, inclusion and marginalisation

Table 1: Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘Teachers are interested in me’ according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘Teachers are interested in me’			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	51%	23%	9%	15%
Bronze	41%	25%	22%	13%
Silver	26%	50%	18%	6%
Gold	56%	27%	12%	2%

Table 2: Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘Pupils respect each other’ according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘Pupils respect each other’			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	48%	41%	2%	9%
Bronze	32%	48%	0%	19%
Silver	30%	58%	1%	12%
Gold	53%	42%	3%	3%

Table 3: Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘I feel proud of who I am’ according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘I feel proud of who I am’			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	67%	7%	9%	7%
Bronze	68%	22%	0%	10%
Silver	55%	29%	7%	8%
Gold	73%	22%	3%	2%

Table 4: Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘My needs are met so I can join in school’ according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils’ responses to the statement ‘My needs are met so I can join in at school’			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	72%	13%	15%	11%
Bronze	66%	3%	13%	19%
Silver	54%	35%	2%	10%
Gold	83%	10%	5%	2%

Table 5: Pupils' responses to the statement 'Different cultures backgrounds are celebrated in school' according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils' responses to the statement 'Different cultures and backgrounds are celebrated in school'			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	82%	7%	7%	4%
Bronze	56%	16%	16%	13%
Silver	69%	19%	7%	5%
Gold	82%	13%	2%	3%

Table 6: Pupils' responses to the statement 'Different abilities and talents are celebrated in school' according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils' responses to the statement 'Different abilities and talents are celebrated in school'			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	72%	17%	2%	9%
Bronze	74%	13%	7%	7%
Silver	66%	26%	4%	5%
Gold	79%	15%	6%	0%

Table 7: Pupils' responses to the statement 'Pupils are treated fairly by adults in school' according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils' responses to the statement 'Pupils are treated fairly by adults in school'			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	67%	22%	4%	7%
Bronze	62%	16%	6%	16%
Silver	60%	26%	3%	12%
Gold	73%	22%	3%	2%

Table 8: Pupils' responses to the statement 'Bullying sometime happens in this school' according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils' responses to the statement 'Bullying sometime happens in this school'			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	48%	28%	13%	11%
Bronze	34%	41%	6%	19%
Silver	48%	32%	5%	14%
Gold	17%	34%	16%	37%

Table 9 Pupils' responses to the statement 'My views are listened to by adults in school' according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils' responses to the statement 'My views are listened to by adults in school'			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	71%	13%	7%	9%
Bronze	55%	19%	13%	13%
Silver	38%	46%	9%	7%
Gold	66%	25%	7%	2%

Table 10: Pupils' responses to the statement 'My rights are respected by adults' according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils' responses to the statement 'My rights are respected by adults'			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	84%	7%	2%	7%
Bronze	81%	6%	0%	13%
Silver	65%	26%	4%	5%
Gold	83%	13%	2%	2%

Table 11: Pupils' responses to the statement 'I enjoy school' according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Pupils' responses to the statement 'I enjoy school'			
	Yes	Sometimes	I am not sure	No
Registered	50%	28%	2%	18%
Bronze	6%	72%	3%	19%
Silver	28%	45%	2%	25%
Gold	56%	32%	3%	10%

Table 12: Teachers' responses to the statement 'I enjoy working at this school' according to school RRSA level

School RRSA level	Teachers' responses to the statement 'I enjoy working at this school'				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Registered	60%	20%	20%	0%	0%
Bronze	50%	43%	0%	0%	7%
Silver	42%	58%	0%	0%	0%
Gold	63%	37%	0%	0%	0%